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# Hide and Seek: How and why Peace Corps Panama Volunteers conceal and reveal parts of their social identities and perceived impacts on their cultural integration

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**Hide and Seek: How and why Peace Corps Panama Volunteers conceal and reveal parts of their social identities and perceived impacts on their cultural integration**

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August 2018

*Table of Contents*

Abstract.....	3
Introduction.....	4
Project Methodology.....	8
Setting the scene: Panama and the Peace Corps.....	10
Literature Review: Theory .....	20
Presentation and Discussion of Data.....	24
References.....	39
Appendix I.....	41
Appendix II.....	42
Appendix III.....	56

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Date: **August 11, 2018**

*Abstract*

*Hide and Seek* explores Peace Corps' role in Panama and details the unique opportunities that Peace Corps Volunteers have to integrate and experience remote communities of the Indigenous tribe known as the Ngäbe Bugle. The main research question of this paper is derived from the challenges that Volunteers in Panama commonly face upon arriving to their communities and presenting themselves to their community members. I will discuss how Volunteers process the cultural differences they experience in their communities, how they respond to them, and whether they choose to conceal or reveal parts of their social identities to their community members. Along with the discussion of my own experiences in Panama, I conducted six qualitative interviews with Volunteers who served in Ngäbe communities from 2015 to 2017. The main theory I use to analyze data is M. Bennett's Developmental Model for Intercultural Sensitivity, which helps designate how Volunteers processed cultural differences and integrated into their host communities.

*I believe we could paint a better world if we learned how to see it from all perspectives, as many perspectives as we possibly could. Because diversity is strength. Difference is a teacher. Fear difference, and you learn nothing.*

Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette*, 2018.

*Introduction and Statement of Research Question*

Peace Corps Volunteers in Bocas del Toro, Panama have a unique opportunity to be assigned to very remote communities. Indigenous and Latino alike, many of the communities that receive Peace Corps Volunteers have limited exposure to culture beyond their neighborhoods. When Peace Corps enter the community, they are a source of information for community members. Simultaneously, the community members are the Volunteers' teachers for local culture, guiding the newcomers in the journey towards integration. The Volunteers learn about religion, language, beliefs, and norms regarding social interactions. It isn't uncommon that Volunteers feel the need to conceal certain identities, religious beliefs or affiliations, behaviors, or backgrounds in order to facilitate their integration into the community. Over time, some reveal themselves more openly to community members and others maintain stronger boundaries throughout service.

On August 30<sup>th</sup>, 2015 a group of 47 new Peace Corps Volunteers departed Panama City to travel to their assigned communities throughout Panama. I was one of them. We had undergone over two months of training that incorporated cultural, linguistic, and technical information to help ease us into our role as cultural ambassadors and project collaborators. Our mission was to "promote world peace and friendship" by carrying out the following goals that are adhered to by all Peace Corps Volunteers worldwide:

- 1 To help the people of interested countries in meeting their need for trained men and women.
- 2 To help promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served.

- 3 To help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans ("About," n.d.)

The above list of goals indicates that a large portion of our mandate as Volunteers is cultural exchange and understanding. Each Volunteer's approach and execution of this mission is distinct and depends on their skills and unique combination of identities. Of course, it also depends on the culture of the host community and that of the surrounding nation. Thus, a successful integration of Peace Corps Volunteers depends on many factors. As trainees, the two months prior to our service was meant to serve as a preparation for the physical and mental challenges that we would confront while fully immersing ourselves in a completely foreign way of life. After the 10-week training program, we swore in as Volunteers and were placed in communities around Panama. Throughout our training we received two more in-service trainings and one close of service training. When I arrived in 2015, my group and I received trainings on coping skills, diversity within our group, and the role of the Volunteer in the community, as well as technical training related to program content.

Throughout these trainings, I attempted to compare and contrast learnings and best practices offered by Peace Corps staff and Volunteers to those that had been presented throughout my time at the School of International Training Graduate Institute (SIT) in Vermont. I found myself profoundly struck by the largest apparent contrast between the two approaches to identity and cross-cultural communication. While at SIT, my peers and I were encouraged to immediately expose our social identities to each other in hopes to work through prevalent biases and support each other as we engaged with and expanded our world views. Adversely, Peace Corps trainers and supporting Volunteers

suggested a more conservative route for Volunteers as they got to know the cultural norms and behaviors of their host communities. The latter approach turned the process of observing one's biases and social identities within a new social context into an internal, private experience. Each Volunteer in Panama is assigned to their own community and no two Peace Corps communities are alike, just as no two Volunteers are alike. Thus, each Volunteer's integration experience is unique and personal. Yet, I believe that the research question might display some insight into the important process that Volunteers experience as they navigate cultural integration amongst vulnerable populations.

I am hoping that sharing this research and conclusions with Training Staff will open up a more in depth discussion with Volunteers about cross cultural integration, communication, and identity before they arrive to site. Mentally preparing for moments when they conceal or reveal parts of themselves to community members can help ease the integration process for Volunteers. The more that a Volunteer integrates socially into their community, the more beneficial the experience of Peace Corps is for both the hosting community and the Volunteer. I hope that this project is able to contribute to the relationships that Volunteers have with their communities. This project will directly relate to the aforementioned second of three main goals of Peace Corps. Any conclusions or insights gained will be offered to the Peace Corps Panama Training team.

The core of this paper will focus on the most basic, yet important aspect of the Volunteer's integration into their host community: how they chose to present themselves to their community. I will focus on the challenges they face in sharing their identities with their community and how they feel it affects their execution of the second Peace

Corps Goal. The question and sub-questions that I will be exploring in this Independent Practitioner Inquiry Capstone are:

**Research Question:** What are the perceived impacts of revealing vs. concealing social identities on Peace Corps Volunteers' integration and work in the community, especially in regards to Goal 2 of Peace Corps ("To help promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served" ("About," n.d.)?)

**Sub-questions:**

- What are the main causes of the instances in which Peace Corps Volunteers conceal parts of their social identities to community members?
- What effects do they perceive (both personally and professionally?)
- In contrast, how do Peace Corps Volunteers perceive the effects of revealing their social identities, beliefs, and backgrounds with certain or all community members?
- What lessons learned throughout the process of cultural integration over a 24-month time span that resulted in shifting Volunteer/community member dynamics could be offered to the Peace Corps Training Team as case studies and/or proposed solutions for future Volunteer groups?

The central model that I will guide my inquiry is M. Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity. This framework outlines an individual's behaviors and awareness of themselves and their environment as they flow through the six designated stages of intercultural integration. Applying this model to the patterns exposed in the



research outcomes will help display areas in which Volunteer's get stuck due to communication barriers between a PCV and community members.

Overall, this project is about an individual's relationship to their social identities and the need to be seen and genuinely understood by the people who surround us. While the context of the project will remain in Panama, I think that everyone might be able to relate to the human experience that is connecting to others by revealing or concealing our social identities to those around us.

### *Project Methodology*

The capstone project used a Qualitative approach to research by collecting the stories and lived experiences of the interviewees. This in combination with the information gathered in the literature review has guided me towards any conclusions and questions for the future. To limit the variables in the data collected for this project, all of the participants interviewed for this project will be Volunteers that were placed in Ngäbe communities in Panama. Because I also was a Peace Corps Volunteer in a Ngäbe community in Panama, I have woven my own lived experiences and observations into this capstone. Even the main question itself was born challenges and insights perceived throughout my own service. The sample selection of interviewees was a convenience sample, due to the access and connections that the researcher has to the Peace Corps Panama community. I will not use any data that might make the research subject or their assigned community vulnerable to be identified by a reader.

I have found there are a limited number of published academic sources of recent data on Ngäbe communities. Besides ethnographic studies and sociopolitical articles written by outside (foreign) researchers, I had access to one document via the Peace

Corps Training team about Ngäbe traditions and practices prepared by a Ngäbe woman who works on the Language and Culture training team for Peace Corps Panama. The author wrote the document for the Peace Corps trainees and used a minimal amount of outside sources to support her descriptions. To supplement the lack of data surrounding political practices, gender norms, and religious influences on the Ngäbe community, I am including data collected by the six participants interviewed for this capstone using participant observation data and Peace Corps assigned surveys. Because it is impossible for an outsider to comment on a culture with zero bias, an observation made by a Peace Corps Volunteer about their hosting country or community should never be perceived as equally veritable as a host country national. However, because of their prolonged, solitary exposure to their hosting community, Peace Corps Volunteers have the ability to profoundly consider their surroundings, seeing past any first reactions and assumptions. This makes Peace Corps Volunteers unique primary sources.

I conducted 6 in-depth interviews with 6 consenting participants. I chose 6 Volunteers within the last six months of their original 27-month arrangement with Peace Corps, so as to be able to discuss the full trajectory of their integration process in their assigned community from start to finish. As I mentioned earlier, all six of the interviewees served in Ngäbe communities. The purpose of these interviews is to hear about the fragile first moments of integration within the first months of service as well as moments that shattered boundaries between Volunteers as they dug deeper into their service, arriving at the ethnorelative stages of Bennett's aforementioned model. I recorded and coded the interviews. The interviews were done over video calls on Skype

or relatable technology convenient to the participant, (ie FaceTime, Whatsapp calls, Facebook Messenger.)

There are two major limitations to the design of this capstone. Peace Corps Panama trains two incoming Volunteer groups each year, they are often updating and changing their training methods based on participants' feedback, new research, new mandatory trainings from Peace Corps Headquarters, and ideas from new incoming staff. This means that while my research included the thorough perspective of a Volunteer at the end of their service, I did not interview newer Volunteers that may have had a different experience based on changes in trainings implemented since G77's training in summer of 2015.

The second design limitation is an exclusion of perceptions of Ngäbe people that have lived closely with Peace Corps Volunteers. Due to their status as a vulnerable population, I did not interview community members who co-exist with the Volunteer Participants. To do so would certainly give a more complete perspective of how the Volunteer integrated into the community over time. To compliment my exploration of this topic, I completed a literary review that included material about Panama, the Ngäbe People and Culture, Peace Corps in Panama, and the theories I used to analyze the data. The literature review has been divided into two sections:

*Setting the scene: Panama and the Peace Corps*

Established during the Cold War in 1961 by President Kennedy, the Peace Corps is a Volunteer organization run by the United States federal government that has sent Volunteers to 141 host countries as of September of 2017 (*2018 Factsheet*, n.d.). Over the decades, the agency has adapted and changed to meet the needs and expectations of

both the Volunteers and host countries. As a result, Peace Corps programs in different countries have uniquely evolved in the way their programming is implemented due to cultural, security, and economic realities of the host country or region. While there are universal rules, expectations, and training mandates from Peace Corps headquarters in Washington DC, the ways that Volunteers are supported, organized, and trained are often unique to a given country or region.

Peace Corps came to fruition as a soft power instrument of the U.S. government, seeking to increase understanding of the U.S.; more specifically seeking to portray a positive image of the U.S. people and culture. It is necessary for the organization to maintain constructive relationships with its two major stakeholders: the U.S. government and any host country's government. As Nisley (2001) discusses in his exploration of Peace Corps effect on popular opinions of Americans, “[p]romoting a “better understanding” does not mean that the U.S. government wants to enhance the knowledge concerning all aspects of the United States, rather only the good aspects” (p. 1). Leaving a positive impact on a general population of a region or country can have a powerful impact on the United States' ability to interact diplomatically. “Even as the United States pursues policies that anger a populace, the presence of PCVs among the population can temper that anger. To a certain extent, PCVs help create a pattern of cognitive dissonance. Nurturing a hatred for the United States is difficult when people have generally positive daily interactions with a citizen of the United States” (p.1). Indeed, Panama is no exception to this theory.

The United States and Panama have experienced a long and tumultuous history together, including prolonged U.S. ownership of the canal from 1914-1999 and the U.S.

military invasion and overthrow of Manuel Noriega known as Operation Just Cause in 1989 (Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, 2018). Panama was one of the first countries in Latin America to host the Peace Corps, starting with about 30 Volunteers in 1962. By 1971 the program had 120 Volunteers, and it was that same year that the organization was excused by the Panamanian government ("Peace Corps," 1971, n.p.).

It was not until 1990 that the Panamanian government requested the Peace Corps to return. Peace Corps has continued sending Volunteers to Panama since then. Despite the 19-year break, Nisely (2001) found that Panama has a relatively widespread positive opinion of the United States compared to other Latin American nations (p. 7-8). When collecting data regarding the popular opinion of the United States in Latin America, Nisley found out that the length of Peace Corps presence in an area was far less impactful than the ratio of Peace Corps Volunteers to 100,000 people (p. 8). Nisley reports that from 2000-2009, Panama had the highest ratio of PCVs to 100,000 people and also had the highest positive opinion of the United States in 2002 and 2007. Although slightly outdated, Nisely's research displays that overall Peace Corps Panama is effectively implementing its mandate to "To help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans," especially a positive understanding of Americans ("About". n.d.). Today, Peace Corps Panama continues to have a high ratio of Volunteers per capita, with a current head count of 204 Volunteers ("Peace Corps in Panama," n.d.) According to the most recent census data, Panama's population is at 4.034 million people ("Panama Data," n.d.). This high ratio of Volunteers today suggests that, based on Nisely's research, one might assume that Panama remains to hold the United States people in high esteem.

Panama has the fortunate presence of a myriad of indigenous groups that continue to coexist with the greater Latino majority, albeit some more prosperously than others. The largest indigenous group in Panama is known as the Ngäbe. Due to the socioeconomic situation of the particular demographic, Ngäbe communities most often request Water and Sanitation, Hygiene (WASH) Volunteers or Sustainable Agriculture Systems (SAS) Volunteers. These are the Volunteers that work with basic needs: agricultural training for sustenance farming and access to clean water (Peace Corps Panama website). Some Ngäbe communities that meet the necessary infrastructure requirements receive Volunteers from the Education sector, which is designated to Teaching English, Leadership and Lifeskills.

Ngäbe communities are mostly rural and small with limited access to transportation, water, and sanitation systems. Some Ngäbe communities, due to their proximity to a paved road and consistent, reliable transportation, are more aware of and interactive with Latino culture, government organizations, and even the thriving tourism industry (both domestic and international). On the other hand, Ngäbe communities that are living on lands further from any roads experience less access to governmental resources and infrastructure support, political representation, and even education. I do not seek to romanticize any exposure to the Panamanian government, because where there are social benefits, there are also injustices and displacements. Conflicts and legal disputes over government construction of hydroelectric dams and copper mines on Ngäbe lands have undermined Ngäbe political and economic autonomy of their own lands (Runk, 2012, p. 4-5). Runk describes these occurrences as a result of “neoliberal governance in Panama [that] has led to diminishing indigenous rights to environment and

lands” (p. 2). Indeed, Peace Corps Volunteers assigned to serve in these communities are dealing with a highly vulnerable population whose ability to continue to thrive and live off their land depends on land preservation, food, and water security. Volunteers that are assigned to Ngäbe communities often come to find that community members have unreliable access to all three of those fundamental resources. A Peace Corps Volunteer’s access to outside resources and funding often plays a big part in how they are received and viewed by their community hosts, due to prior experience or inexperience a given community has had with outside organizations. Runk’s research as well as my own observations of the power dynamic that plays into Peace Corps Volunteer’s integration into Ngäbe communities led me to include the following question in my qualitative interviews with current PCVs: “What was your experience establishing yourself as a neutral community member as well as an educated professional with access to resources?” The variety of responses to this question demonstrates a variety of approaches that Volunteers employed, but also a variety in the communities’ relationship to development efforts and personnel coming from the outside.

Due to the nature of the relationship that some Ngäbe communities have with governmental agencies and representatives, Ngäbe communities vary highly in their comfort levels with outsiders and the way they view and interact with Peace Corps Volunteers as well as Panamanian or other foreign organizations looking to support social or economic projects in a given community. It is not surprising that PCVs working with Ngäbe people often frame any description of their assigned community by how accessible or remote their community is to the rest of Panama. Despite the large variability of Ngäbe culture and a lack of written academic resources about it, I will attempt to give a brief

overview of the Ngäbe culture and epistemology in order for the reader to later comprehend common social norms that PCVs need to learn to navigate in order to proceed in their integration processes.

Geopolitically, the Ngäbe communities are mostly confined to two political territories that are separated by a dramatic geographic barrier, known as the Cordillera de Talamanca. One of the territories is a Panamanian province called Bocas del Toro, which lays at the Caribbean Sea borders with Costa Rica to its west. The other territory is an indigenous autonomous region, known as a Comarca in Panama. Politically, this means that the population has its own constitution and elects an administrative government and local officials, while the federal government still manages public spending and tax revenues within the territory (Garcia and Aguilar, 2001, n.p.) Without the increased land and environmental protection that the Ngäbes living in the Comarca enjoy, the Bocas Ngäbes are more vulnerable to government and foreign commerce impacting their ability to sustain their culture and way of life.

Economically, Ngäbe people traditionally sustain themselves by sustenance farming for their families. Families and neighbors participate in reciprocal economic practices, supporting each other through loans and gifts, which provides a sense of security outside of a single-family household. They also take part in local markets by selling cash crops such as rice, yucca, bananas, cacao, and sometimes plantains. Wood and cows are also a common source of income. Because wood and cows take longer to generate income, taking part in these endeavors are often seen as longer-term investments with higher stakes and higher rewards. It is not uncommon for these means of income to be insufficient for families to live off of. In 2001, Bort and Young's research showed that



“the population has increased rapidly, and subsistence needs can no longer be met with the land available. This has forced greater involvement in wage labor which, in turn, has increased the influence of external forces on the society and weakened traditional economic and social patterns” (p. 134). In my travels throughout both Ngäbe geopolitical territories, I found these threats to remain prevalent and burdensome to families. It is not uncommon for Ngäbe families to rely on at least one of the variety of governmental welfare programs to provide their most basic needs of food and clothes. Families who have managed to send children to the city to find work might also benefit from any money sent home from their children.

The gender norms that are common in Ngäbe communities have a similar rigidity to the norms that are followed in the greater Panamanian society. Gender roles and dynamics vary in different communities and are influenced by the extent to which women have a source of independent income, are educated, and the extent to which they are isolated from other women or outside resources (Young, 2014, p. 209). Young collected data across a span of 50 years, mostly from the area that is now considered the Ngäbe-Bugle Comarca on the Chiriqui side of the Cordillera de Talamanca. Certain observances show that Ngäbe women exercise greater household responsibility and bear a heavier work burden, as they are often expected to take part in agricultural duties as well (p. 200). The researcher noted that education is also more prolific amongst females in the in the Ngäbe communities. My observations concur with these findings, noting that women of my age were the first generation in my assigned Peace Corps community to have the opportunity to pursue an education and study past elementary school and onto high school and university. It wasn't uncommon or illegal for girls to discontinue their

education at the age of 12 or 14. My findings will later show that these types of gender norms are cause for adjustment for both male and female Volunteers who come from the U.S. where free and accessible education is provided by law to all genders and seen as a right rather than a privilege.

While observing gender norms impacts all genders, female identifying Peace Corps Volunteers can often have larger gaps in the way their behavior is judged and expected to change. Peace Corps Panama details the impact that gender dynamics have on female PCVs experiences throughout the country:

Female Volunteers may find it difficult to adapt to Panamá's male-dominated society. They may be verbally harassed or even experience physical harassment. They may not be taken seriously intellectually or in their work. They may not be able to socialize with males without giving the impression that they are flirting, and they may be judged differently than men for behaviors such as smoking, drinking, walking alone, or going out at night. In addition, because they are from the United States, they may be assumed to be sexually promiscuous. Panamanians may consider it strange that female Volunteers do not spend their days cooking, cleaning, and washing. ("Panama Diversity," n.d)

Although written to describe the general atmosphere between men and women in Panama, these attitudes and norms could all possibly be felt within Ngäbe communities as well. These dynamics are one example that demonstrates why safety and security played a big part in Volunteer's decision making around what parts of their social identities and associated behaviors they shared with their community members. To extend too far beyond the comfort of these cultural norms might put the Volunteer in a

position that not only endangers their ability to integrate effectively, but also their physical health and safety.

Another aspect of gender norms that impacts Volunteer integration is the attitudes towards people that identify as LGBTQA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, or ally). As Ngäbe communities have been highly influenced by Catholic and Christian faiths, it is not uncommon for Ngäbes to have negative perceptions of LGBTQ identifying people. People are presumed to be straight and LGBTQ identities are not widely expressed openly in Panamanian society. Peace Corps states that “Some LGBTQ Volunteers have chosen to come out to community members, with a result of positive and negative reactions, while some have come out only to select Peace Corps staff and Volunteers. Many have chosen to be discreet about their orientation and/or gender identity within their host community” (“Panama Diversity,” n.d). As Peace Corps states, it is the Volunteer’s choice to reveal or conceal this aspect of their identity to their community and includes LGBTQ identities in their discussions of identity within trainings on diversity so that Volunteers can consider their options within the context of Panamanian society.

Another important factor to impact a Volunteer’s authentic expression of identity is race and ethnicity. It is common for Panamanians to be surprised to meet an American that does not fit into the stereotype of being white with light hair and eyes. Race is not an aspect of identity that people can always choose to conceal from those around them. Volunteers of color, who do not follow the perceptions of many Panamanians of what U.S. Americans look like, often are asked to explain themselves or their identity. Peace Corps details the instances to often cause Volunteers to range from “being mistaken for a

host country national to being questioned about their U.S. citizenship, to facing behavior and language skill expectations or ridicule, to being able to get better prices for goods and services” (“Panama Diversity,” n.d). Language and attitudes around race are unique within communities and provinces due to the diverse ethnic and racial makeup of the country and the history of how those groups have interacted with each other over time.

Indeed, many Peace Corps Volunteers of color do not make the choice to hide any aspects of their identity from their in-country hosts, rather they live the consequences, both positive and negative of looking different from perceived expectations of U.S. Americans appearance. While not directly informative to my research questions, these interactions surely have a great impact on Volunteer’s integration into their communities and Panama in general. Volunteers of color may be asked to explain their skin color at any given time in Panama and while they can decide not to answer questions, they cannot conceal that aspect of their social identity altogether. There are instances where Volunteer’s race and ethnicity are less conspicuous and becomes a choice for Volunteers to discuss this aspect of social identity with their community members.

Similar to the rest of Panama Ngäbe, most people that do participate in religious groups subscribe to Christian or Catholic churches. There is also a local religion called Mama Tata, also known as Mama Chi, a religion that combines Christian beliefs with the desire to revitalize and transform Ngäbe culture and identity (Young, 2014, p. 198). “Mama Chi and the religion she founded represented a reaction to decades of recent oppression and provided a framework to the Ngäbe for a collective reassessment of their situation in the face of increasing involvement with Panamanian national cultural and forces of globalization” (207). I include this discussion to exemplify the variety of

Ngäbe religious expression. However, sadly, none of the PCVs interviewed for this project served in communities where this religion was a majority group or even prevalent. On the whole, the existence of a largely homogenous acceptance of Christian and Catholic faiths means that many Ngäbes (and even Panamanians) have had limited exposure to people who subscribe to other faiths. Peace Corps Panama relates:

Volunteers of religions other than Christianity may be challenged or face generalizations about people of their religion. They may not be thought of as real Americans. Jews may occasionally be considered anti-Christian. Thus, some Volunteers may not feel comfortable disclosing their religion to the people in their community. Volunteers may not be able to find a suitable place of worship near their site or may find it difficult to fulfill their religion's dietary requirements.

("Panama Diversity," n.d.)

Volunteers facing dilemmas about religious conversation and differences in their beliefs versus those of their community members must navigate this internal question as they learn about their particular community's religious dynamics and understandings.

### *Literature Review: Theory*

When I first approached my research subjects to discuss with them my research question and the contribution that their input might donate to my findings, I needed to outline for them how I define social identity throughout the capstone. For this task I shared with them learnings from Halverson's chapter on social identity in *Effective Multicultural Teams: Theory and Practice*. This book, and the chapter particularly, was the foundation for the students at the School for International Training as we approached

learning and integrated into a multicultural environment. Halverson (2008) explains that understanding our own complex web of social identities and the fact that certain social identities allow us privilege (also referred to as one ups) and others can be a disadvantage (also referred to as one-downs) can help us perceive how we impact others and if we need to modify our behaviors for the well-being of a group (p. 43-45). Halverson details a list of social identity elements that include such dimensions as “family, community, nationality, “race,” ethnicity, age, religion, gender, physical and mental ability, sexual orientation, marital and family status, socioeconomic class, educational level, language accent, geographic location, military status, job function, and job level” (p. 44). Many of these identities came up in my discussions with the interviewees as they related stories of integrating into their assigned Peace Corps communities. Their experiences within these social groups impacted how they perceived their community members and how they related to them. A Volunteer must consider and decide to reveal or conceal their social identities to the community members, whether it a very apparent or dominant social group that impacts one from birth, such as “race” or gender, or a more transient social identity like marital status. As Volunteers are living in their assigned communities 24/7 and do not necessarily have a consistent outlet in which to connect with outside support groups, the choice to conceal their identities can be a heavy one. Not only are they keeping it a secret by omission of words, but by action as well. To relearn how to socially interact can feel burdensome or overwhelming when also dealing with so much change on top of it. When facing these challenging moments, Halverson makes the following suggestions for a person to navigate the changes we are experiencing as we adapt and integrate in multicultural groups: be aware of the impact of your behavior on others,

Engage constructively with differences (individual, social, cultural), and Clarify and communicate your needs (p.70). For a more detailed list of the suggestions, see Appendix I. I include these tactics because they are helpful to observe which of these competencies are relatable to more ethnorelative movements Volunteers have in their integration. As they deepen their relationships with their community members and understand the communities' social norms and dynamics, they might also then understand their own impact on others and might more clearly reveal themselves to those around them as well.

M. Bennett's developmental theory on Intercultural Sensitivity also adds insight to the discussion of Volunteer's approaches to integration in their community because at its core it details how an outsider observes and processes differences they are experiencing in a new place or social group (1993, p. 21-22). Bennett chooses to focus on how we perceive and interact with difference in immersive situations because it is a more difficult and trying task than relying only on what is similar, and that denying or ignoring what is different among people in intercultural setting can lead to difficulties in integration (p. 25). There are six stages within the model that include both strengths and challenges that a person within that level experiences. The model identifies three ethnocentric stages in which an outsider has more superficial experience of difference in which they rely more heavily on comparison, called **Denial**, **Defense**, and **Minimalization**. Bennett uses the term ethnocentric as a person who assumes "that the worldview of one's own culture is central to all reality" (p. 30). The **Denial** of difference stage is the purest of this attitude. The stage connotes that a learner does not acknowledge or appreciate cultural diversity. As I will affirm later, Peace Corps Volunteers are unlikely to stay in this stage, if they exist there at all, because of the inherent willingness

to explore beyond their comfort zones and learn about another culture from host country nationals and Peace Corps trainers. To remain in this stage a person must maintain strong personal and/or physical boundaries (p. 30). The **Defense** of difference stage is when an individual is not ignoring what is different, but feels threatened by encountered differences, often leading to stereotyping and denigration (p. 35). Another aspect of this stage, commonly seen in Peace Corps Volunteers according to Bennett, is reversal, wherein a person embraces a new culture as wholeheartedly superior to their native culture and/or other cultures (p. 35). **Minimilization** of difference is an attempt to disavow the importance of the difference, which he describes as an alluring position, because a person can feel that they are making everyone feel comfortable. However, it is all too often is a position assumed by people from dominant cultures whose biases are unchallenged (p. 42). Most relevant to this paper is that **Minimalization** of difference includes the phenomenon a person assumes that always being their true self will ensure a “successful interaction. Of course, it is ethnocentric to think that one’s natural self is automatically understandable, since it assumes that one’s own cultural is central to everyone’s worldview” (p. 44). This is why difference does matter, and Peace Corps Volunteers succumb to the need to conceal parts of their social identity to their host communities, at least in the beginning of their service, when they are still learning about the nuances of communication, perception, and behavior in their host communities. To reinforce that the stages are designed to point out an individual’s perception and interaction with cultural *differences*, I will refer to the three ethnocentric stages as **Denial of difference, Defense of difference, and Minimilization of difference.**



The model also identifies three stages that are ethnorelative in nature, describing interactions that are flexible, culturally responsive, and appropriate, called **Acceptance**, **Adaptation**, and **Integration** (p. 29). “Stages of ethnorelativism begin with the acceptance of cultural difference as inevitable and enjoyable [**Acceptance**], through adaptation to cultural difference with intercultural communication skills [**Adaptation**], to the final stage of integration in which ethnorelativism may be synthesized into a coherent and workable new identity [**Integration**]” (p. 47). These stages might help point out where and how Volunteers overcame the differences they experience in their assigned communities and might give some insight into the types of language that was useful to overcome them. They also might help to showcase ways in which both Volunteers and host community members can benefit from Volunteers concealing or revealing their social identities to their community members. In the following sections I apply aspects of both Bennett’s and Halverson’s theories to the anecdotes I collected throughout my six in-depth interviews.

### *Presentation and Discussion of Data*

When Volunteers arrived at their sites they had already been in country for almost 3 months as Peace Corps trainees, and during that time had been thoroughly educated by Peace Corps trainers and in country hosts about the unique culture of Panama. Therefore, I ruled out the possibility that any of the interviewees could possibly still remain in Bennett’s **Denial** of difference stage on his scale of Intercultural Sensitivity. Of course, because the interviews were conducted within the last 6 months of each Volunteer’s service in their assigned communities, the interviewees could only answer how they remember perceiving their host community in the beginning. The first question I asked

each interviewee was **“Upon first arriving to the community, what cultural differences do you remember connecting with right away?”** assuming that they were already aware that their integration and sensitivity towards their new host culture would require them to observe and reflect upon cultural differences. One interviewee confirmed this when explaining her preparedness to absorb and consider all that was new and different around her before reacting. “I think in training they warned us about talking about religion, about concealing that. But I didn’t go in with many pre conceived notions, so I didn’t really think about having to change myself and how I’m perceived. But I guess I kind of knew that I was going to have to modify my actions a little bit for any cultural experience” (personal communication, October 20, 2017). The answers show that upon first arriving to their sites, the interviewees were able to connect with and admire the culture and behaviors of their community that differed from their previous lifestyles but did not put a blind eye to any differences they were experiencing. Five interviewees responded to this question with observations that reflected their backgrounds and values but did not reflect their social identity. Only one person out of the six responded with a cultural connection that related to his own identity, stating that he related to the youth of his same gender and their struggles to become educated and seek a better life for themselves, despite many obstacles. The interviewee related, “I connected with my counterpart, that he was pursuing higher education and kind of like the struggles he would tell me about...like having to travel all the time being away from home everything you have to pay for. That’s something I connected with. Like the, I guess you could say, the youth of my gender...my age” (personal communication, October 2, 2017). All six responded with answers that demonstrated a respect for the new place surrounding them

and a desire to take part in at least a portion of the culture surrounding them. For example, “Everyone being so family oriented. Definitely. Because you don’t really know your neighbors back in the States, unless you live in a small community, and I lived in a small town growing up, but even then I barely knew my neighbors. And in my community in the Comarca, it was like if someone went out to hunt something then they like shared it with everyone. And so it was like have all, give all to all and that was just very refreshing” (personal communication, October 30, 2017). These answers suggested that, despite being different from their own social norms, they were willing to engage with the aspects of the community behaviors they connected with in order to integrate and gain trust with the community. Indeed, it was very apparent that the Volunteers were well prepared to prioritize Halverson’s advice to “engage constructively with differences” by listening and educating themselves. They also provide hints that Volunteers move, some quicker than others, through the **Defense** of difference stage when first arriving, because they very often compare the behaviors and values to their own. Over time, as Volunteers learn more about their environments it gets easier for them to compare less and accept more whole-heartedly what they see as good and bad based on their contextual understanding. For example, one volunteer was able to take note that her choice to not have children by her age was very unique in her community:

Once I had trust...with certain people in my community, the ones who were closest to me- my friends my family, I was able to open up a little bit more ...about what it is to be a woman what it is to be a young woman, in my eyes a young woman. For them, a lot of women my age in the community already have 3,4,5,6, or 7 children. For me, coming in as a 23 year old woman, it was very

strange to them that I was not already a mother. Just kind of talking to them about those values...it took them a little while, they were weirded out at first but then once we had that trust, we were able to have the talk...where I told them...these are my values and this is what I want to do with my life and this is where I want to go and I've made a plan and that plan right now does not involve having children (personal communication, October 25, 2017).

The volunteer related in this anecdote that despite noticing a difference in values and expectations related to her female identity, she knew she needed time to build trust and respect before acknowledging this difference. It also allowed her to feel more at ease with being different from her community members.

The second question was a follow up to the first question, **“What were the cultural differences you observed that were harder to understand as an outsider?”** (See Appendix III). The responses to the second question provide further examples that mirror Bennett's **Defense** of difference stage. However, the Volunteers add any comparisons they reflect upon with an element of Halverson's advice to be persistent. For example, two Volunteers discussed their observations about gender norms and roles. One Volunteer focused on the lack of communication between men and women, relating that “the distance between men and women, how unless you are a family member with a woman they are not going to be friendly with you unless they're your lover” was a difficult dynamic to maneuver (personal communication, November 8, 2017). Yet the interviewee didn't give up when initially facing that perceived rejection. “That was really weird because I wanted to be friends with them a lot faster than I was. Took me throughout my service to become friends with a lot of them. I just forced myself into

*pasearing* [visiting] into everyone's life. I just kept bothering them and asking how they were. If they wouldn't talk to me I would talk at them and eventually they just loosened up I guess..." (November 8, 2017).

Another interviewee discussed her own internal persistence with gender norms in her assigned community. She felt that what she witnessed in the Ngäbe community was a major shock that opened her eyes to the gender inequalities of the world. When I asked her how that impacted her integration as a female Volunteer, she responded "I tried to shed it as much as I could, but after a while I feel like I realized I had to accept it for how they took it as and focus on the positive benefits of it...I think it made [integration] difficult at first, but once I realized what the differences were and also realized that it's a cultural thing that I can't change necessarily how they're born and raised to think something is" (personal communication, October 20, 2017). You can see here how a Volunteer really dug into emotions about what they were witnessing, realizing that she wouldn't be comfortable if she continued to attempt to shield herself from or "shed" the emotional impact it was having on her. These examples display how the interviewees carefully waded through the differences they observed in the early stages of their integration in order to move past any danger of generalizing and assuming too early on, a behavior that is most easily related to the **Minimalization** of difference phase. Of course they are acknowledging the difference within themselves, but prefer to take their time before vocalizing every aspect of it between them and their host community members. It also shows how they experience their gender identity and seek to understand how the "one-up"/ "one-down" of the gender dynamic is different within their assigned

community compared to previous experiences and how it impacts how they form relationships and are seen by others.

When moving on in their service, a challenge in integration for Volunteers is to manage the balance between the three goals of Peace Corps. How can Volunteers provide technical support and train community members in an effective way without establishing too much of a power-over dynamic? In order to influence the answers of the interviewees, I presented this question with the following wording: **“What was your experience establishing yourself as a neutral community member as well as an educated professional with access to resources?”** (See Appendix III). I found the need to establish this dynamic led to Volunteers to follow Halverson’s advice to listen and learn first from the community (See Appendix I). Four out of the six interviewees spoke about how creating this kind of trust and respect among community members impacted their expression of social identity, including aspects such as gender, sexuality, or language, or class. One Volunteer struggled both with language and gender identities:

I feel like being part of the agriculture sector, in terms of women having to like suppress their voice and not going out to the finca [“farm”] as much, it was kinda hard to establish my validity as an ag[riculture] Volunteer...I had pretty good Spanish going in too. But also I’m sure I made a ton of mistakes so it was also very hard to...sound intelligent when you’re speaking another language. So, I think maybe they would judge me sometimes If I was trying to explain a technique but didn’t have all the words for it so they are just like who is this girl coming in trying to explain something that I’ve been doing my whole life, teaching me a different technique. It was kind of hard. So kind of 8 months in to,

almost a year is when I felt really comfortable telling people what resources they had and really like speaking up. (personal communication, October 30 2017)

This Volunteer described concerns to challenging gender norms too much in the beginning as well as the difficulties that arose between people who have different educational and linguistic experiences.

When dealing with people who have had limited exposure to outside education and new ideas, one Volunteer used an analogy that he created together with his community. They realized that when he arrived he was similar to a newborn child in his understanding of the community and its language and culture. He believed it had the effect of the community to not only remember to teach him how to participate in their culture as if he were a child, but also reminded them that he didn't necessarily know any specialized knowledge about their environment or resources. Of course, he would communicate his willingness to work for their needs and find out the best solution together, but didn't want his education to be a barrier between him and the community members. "To them I didn't want them to think I was someone with an incredible amount of knowledge or an incredible amount of experience. That I could be the answer to all their questions. I guess normal in a sense that I knew as much as they did and I could figure out as much as they could figure out" (personal communication, October 2, 2017). In this case, the interviewee put his social identity of an educated person in the background and rather than conceal it altogether.

Social identity is expressed both verbally and in action. Thus, to extricate any alterations the interviewees made to their social identities throughout their service, I asked them both about changes to their actions and changes to their personal narratives. I

asked the interviewees: **Were there times that you concealed your social identity within your host community when you first arrived? Can you describe the context of the scenario and the reason why did conceal these things? What do you perceive were the effects of that decision?** (See Appendix III). Many of the Volunteers related that their changes in behavior revolved around gender identity and expression. One described to me that as a female, she didn't make friends with men the way she had in the U.S. Before arriving in Panama, the fact that she usually socialized more often with men than women was something she wasn't truly aware of (personal communication, October 20, 2017). "And I had to be very aware of those situations. When you hang out with [men], what you talk about and all that stuff and making sure to have female relationships as well" (October 20, 2017). Another Volunteer added that they would express femininity differently to avoid being over sexualized or objectified (personal communication, October 16, 2017). Another Volunteer discussed how they altered their expression of gender as way to conceal their sexuality.

[It was] a way my more feminine features or more feminine quality, feminine expressions ...like...what I would wear. Not that I wear super crazy things...but like I kept my earrings really small. I just kept like little pebble thingies instead of anything bright or dangly, I was like you can't wear any of that. The clothes I wore, pretty boring, nothing too colorful, nothing too like out there um, the way I presented myself. And like the way I shook people's hand, I would be like really firm and tough. The way I sat, never crossed the legs never like putting your hand upwards in an awkward spot. Never showing too much affection to men, never being overly grateful to men or overly nice to men, and just being like *whatever...*



not talking about anything in terms of sex or dating at all. Just not even talking about it. I don't think I would lie about being straight so I would just avoid the topic. (personal communication, October 2, 2017)

Indeed, these are profound adjustments to be made and require a person to have a keen sensitivity to what is expected and required of them by their host community in order to integrate and serve effectively. These are examples of **Minimization** of difference due to the fact that the interviewees were avoiding difference in order to feel at ease and safe. Peace Corps training can prepare the Volunteers with anecdotes and disclaimers similar to the descriptions I included above, but each Volunteer processes and internalizes this process individually.

Another notable behavior change had to do with an interviewee's identity as an introvert. A different interviewee found that the time she sought to spend alone was often interpreted as sadness and/or homesickness due to the fact that Ngäbe communities are so purely communal with little value placed on privacy and alone time. As an introvert, she needed to have time to herself each day but she didn't want to worry people. She began to wake up early to get that alone time in in the early morning, when the community didn't take notice of her spending time alone and in silence. This way, the Volunteer was able to meet her needs by considering her integration process (October 25, 2017).

These changes in behavior demonstrates that the Volunteers used learnings about their own social identities and the culture around them to experiment with how they can express themselves within their assigned community in a safe and respectful way. The changes to behavior and any actions of concealing identity are meant to create a dynamic in which neither the Volunteer nor the community members have power over each other,

just a dedication to learn more about each other and to create patterns of behavior that will provide more opportunities for learning. They are examples of Halverson's advice to both be persistent and adjust. They also demonstrate a movement towards Bennett's **Adaptation** stage, where people are willing and conscious to change and how to change their behavior to solve problems and show empathy.

Social identities sometimes are expressed more strongly through our personal narratives and how we describe ourselves to others verbally. The Volunteers that I interviewed altered their narratives through small "lies," dilutions, or omissions. A common instance that Volunteers inaccurately portrayed their identity was when questions of social class or money came up. When people asked about income, prices of possessions, or prices of things in the United States, Volunteers often rely on concealing the information by saying they are gifted things. One Volunteer justified this decision to ease the integration process. "They are all here living poor and I'm supposed to be living among these people at the same poverty level but actually I can leave when I want to. So I would just lie so people would see me as an equal, as an ally" (personal communication, October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2017). Another Volunteer took a similar approach when concealing her feminist views about gender:

I kind of had to dilute my strong worldviews just to see what their views were first. Because there are very defined gender roles in the community that I was able to see. And it took me adapting those roles first, let's say, playing the game, a little bit. To gain the confidence in the community to be able to talk about those things and to ask questions. I think if I just came in strong with my shaved head, people might not have the same response. But by coming in and taking over those

traditionally female roles and learning how to do them and learning how to do them well and integrating well within the community allowed me then to be able to kind of at a certain point challenge those ideas and ask about them. (personal communication, October 25, 2017)

In these instances, both Volunteers chose to conceal or change their viewpoints in response to the surrounding culture. The latter adjusted her approach over time (mirroring Bennett's **Acceptance** stage), later dialoguing more comfortably about gender roles and asserting herself more clearly as a feminist (mirroring the **Adaptation** phase). She believed that her approach had a positive impact on her integration because she was able to educate herself, gain trust, and time any critical discussions she had tactfully to have a greater impact.

Another Volunteer altered her personal narrative to showcase an alternative viewpoint on divorce and couple separation than the common approaches and attitudes about divorce.

I just wanted them to know that relationships can end but people can still be civil with each other and communicate. I would always say that even though my parents are divorced, they still love me and they love each other and they talk all the time on the phone. But I know they don't. But I just wanted them to be like "oh my gosh! Cool" ... relationships can end well. Like the dad just doesn't run away to another community or country and start at whole different family. And set a good example, for the muchachos [young men of the community]. So they can be like ... I don't have to leave and leave my family and my baby mama behind. (personal communication, October 30, 2017)

This Volunteer uses her story to provide an alternative idea to a common issue she observed in Ngäbe family dynamics: the abandonment of mothers and children by their birth fathers. This is a different approach than being honest or concealing or omitting honesty. It demonstrates the difficulty of concealing one's own values and social identity. The example is more of an example of Bennett's **Defense** of difference stage, where individuals continue to compare. I included this anecdote to remind the reader that while some aspects of our identity can integrate easily, others may remain stuck due to our own processes and reactions to how the surrounding culture approaches these identities. There is not always a holistic arrival to the ethnorelative stages. This same interviewee, though stuck in Bennett's **Defense** of difference stage in that one arena of her social identity, did arrive to the **Acceptance** phase after struggling with their ability to communicate early in service. "I came to grips after a few months that everything I do was going to look amazing or really strange. After a certain while, I just decided to be goofy and loud and just like make funny comments sometimes. I guess embrace the weirdness" (October 30, 2017).

In some cases, Volunteers end up feeling comfortable enough in their relationships and established enough in their integration process to change their approach to how they express or conceal their social identity. For example, one Volunteer concealed for a long time that his father had committed suicide when he was 15. "I did not tell them that because I did not think that they would be...sensitive. I didn't trust them to be sensitive. There were only a couple of people in my site that I ever told about that. Whereas I never told anybody I didn't believe in god, I did tell a couple of people in my site that my dad committed suicide" (personal communication, November 8, 2017).

In this case, the Volunteer concealed this part of his identity for his own protection more so than for the benefit of his integration or his community member's perception of him. However, the fact that he made close enough relationships with a few of his community members shows that he was able to find compassion and empathy within his relationships to reveal more of himself. I would argue that this showcase Bennett's **Integration** stage, where the friendships and trust he built with certain community members allowed him to fully and openly represent himself in his community without feeling burdened by being unique.

Overall, the Volunteers expressed that changing or concealing their social identities for the sake of their Peace Corps service was a good idea. For many, it was a bigger commitment than what they expected, and even realizing that the impacts of those decisions were different than what she expected. For example, one Volunteer told community members that she was in a relationship to avoid solicitations for marriage, and would have rather been honest about being a self-sufficient single woman than conforming to patriarchal values to make community members more comfortable around her (personal communication, October 20, 2017). This is an example of the gravity of the impact that a Volunteer's choices are at the beginning of service, and how difficult it can feel internally as they continue to live in a world where their social identities are concealed and their values are not reflected in the world around them. It is the effect of getting trapped in the **Minimization** of difference stage, a behavior that was all too appealing in the beginning of service. When asked **Is there any advice surrounding these topics that you would offer to future groups coming in that could help inform the training of incoming Volunteers?** (See Appendix III) all six volunteers hoped that

new Volunteers prioritize patience in feeling comfortable and safe. In summation, over time Volunteers should continue to empathize and consider their choices when approaching their communication and behavior as they serve their community. In time, feeling different can feel less burdensome and more fun and special to Volunteers.

Working with Ngäbe people presents many unique challenges for Peace Corps Volunteers. It also provides unique opportunities to work with meeting the needs of a vulnerable population by sharing ideas, culture, and useful technical knowledge and resources. It takes a sensitive, patient, and observant Peace Corps Volunteer to integrate into these communities. The extent to which Volunteers are responsible to share themselves with their community members in order to complete the second goal of Peace Corps was interpreted differently by each Volunteer. Because being completely honest or refusing to change one's behavior might result in unsecure circumstances for the Volunteer, one must first enter curious and cautious. One interviewee stated, "By working and living in a way that promotes general positive culture you are sharing your bit of U.S. culture. That's what it is to be American...the sense of individualism...like I'm going to be who I am, help in a way that I can. It's being helpful and excited. So that's my responsibility. I don't think it's my responsibility to teach people an idea of "standard American" because I am not a standard American" (personal communication, October 16, 2017). Of course, I hope that both Volunteers and their communities benefit from the hard work and dedication that Volunteers put into their integration and service.

What I enjoyed about this project was how broad the topic was. My interviewees had so many profound internal experiences regarding their social identities, how they represented themselves, and how they were perceived by their host community members.

By allowing them to tell stories about any parts of themselves that felt challenged in their Ngäbe community, I was able to appreciate a variety of response and tactics to concealing and/or revealing parts of themselves. Further in-depth research could be done on one of the aspects of social identity that I discussed in this paper and across different countries as well.

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**Appendix I: Excerpt from Social Identity Group and Individual Behavior by C. Halverson, 2008.**

- Be aware of the impact of your behavior on others
  - Understand your personality and its impact
  - Understand how your culture has impacted your values and behavior
  - Understand your emotions
  - Acknowledge your privileges and seek to learn about blind spots in one-up identities
  - Acknowledge your experiences in one-down identities and seek support
- Engage constructively with differences: individual, social, cultural
  - Clarify and communicate your needs
  - Listen: Take in the experiences of the other. Do not expect individuals to be spokespersons for their group. Do not deny their experience.
  - Learn: be able to observe, sort out, and make sense of clues that enable you to see what the other person needs. Educate yourself.
- Clarify and communicate your needs
  - Speak up: speak out against acts and name practices that marginalize, stereotype or discount yourself or others
  - Be persistent
  - Be flexible, adjust (p. 70).

## Appendix II

**A DEVELOPMENTAL MODEL  
OF INTERCULTURAL SENSITIVITY\***

**Milton J. Bennett, M.D.**

**I. DENIAL OF DIFFERENCE**

The inability to construe cultural difference. Indicated by benign stereotyping (well-meant but ignorant or naive observations) and superficial statements of tolerance. May sometimes be accompanied by attribution of deficiency in intelligence or personality to culturally deviant behavior. Tendency to dehumanize outsiders.

**1. Denial/Isolation:** Isolation in homogeneous groups fails to generate either the opportunity or the motivation to construct relevant categories for noticing and interpreting cultural difference.

**2. Denial/Separation:** Intentional separation from cultural difference protects worldview from change by creating the conditions of isolation. Some awareness of cultural difference may yield undifferentiated broad categories, such as "foreigner" or "Asian" or "Black."

**Cognitive Structure:**

- No categories ("what difference?") or only broad categories for different cultures.

**Affective Quality:**

- Benign on the surface ("live and let live"), but potentially genocidal when pressed into cross-cultural contact.

**Behavioral Emphasis:**

- Aggressive ignorance ("I don't need to know"), stress on the familiar.

**Exercise of Power:**

- Possibility of exploitation.

**At this stage, learners say:**

- "Live and let live, that's what I say."
- "All big cities are the same-lots of buildings, too many cars, McDonalds."
- "What I really need to know about is art and music."
- "As long as we all speak the same language, there's no problem."
- "The main concerns I have involve knowing how to get around and ordering in restaurants."

- "With my experience, I can be successful in any culture without any special effort."
- "I never experience culture shock."
- "All I need to know about is politics and history-I can figure out the rest of it as I go along."

## **DEVELOPING COMPETENCE: DENIAL**

### **DEVELOPMENTAL TASK:**

To recognize the existence of cultural differences

### **CHALLENGE AND SUPPORT:**

Learners experience of difference: High Challenge Educators should emphasize:

High Support

### **TO SUPPORT THE LEARNERS:**

#### **Content:**

- Objective culture: Art, music, literature, theatre, dance
- Heroes and holidays
- Culture specific social science: Politics, history, economics, sociology
- Travel tips: "Do's and taboos"
- Use symbols, not target cultures

#### **Process:**

- Illustrate ideas with user-friendly activities
- Embed differences in non-threatening contexts
- Promote an inclusive, non-blaming climate
- Address learner anxieties in existing categories, but limit time
- Build on what they already know

### **TO CHALLENGE THE LEARNERS:**

#### **Content:**

- Subjective culture: Selected values, beliefs, and behaviors
- A constructive vision of intercultural interaction

#### **Process:**

- Arouse curiosity
- Facilitate structured contact with other cultures through films, slides, panel presentations, etc.

### **STAGE-APPROPRIATE INTERCULTURAL SKILLS:**

- The ability to gather appropriate information about culture
- The initiative to explore aspects of subjective culture
- Trust, friendliness, cooperation
- The ability to recognize difference

## II. DEFENSE AGAINST DIFFERENCE

Recognition of cultural difference coupled with negative evaluation of most variations from native culture-the greater the difference, the more negative the evaluation. Characterized by dualistic us/them thinking and frequently accompanied by overt negative stereotyping.

Evolutionary view of cultural development with native culture at the acme. A tendency towards social/cultural proselytizing of "underdeveloped" cultures.

**3. Defense/Denigration:** Cognitive categories for construing cultural difference are isolated by evaluating them negatively, thus protecting world view from change. ("I know Americans have a different culture, but everything about it proves what barbarians they are.")

**4. Defense/Superiority:** Existing cultural world view is protected by exaggerating its positive aspects compared to all other cultures. Any neutral or positive statement about another culture may be interpreted as an attack.

**5. Defense/Reversal:** Tendency to see another culture as superior while maligning one's own. Dualistic thinking is identical; only the poles are reversed.

### **Cognitive Structure:**

- Better elaborated categories for cultural difference, but original world view is protected by poor integration of the new categories (hardening of the categories).

### **Affective Quality:**

- State of siege; defense of privilege and defense of identity.

### **Behavioral Emphasis:**

- Same-culture segregation; "backlash" actions; possible support for supremacist and hate groups.

### **Exercise of Power:**

- Exclusionary denial of equal opportunity.

### **At this stage, learners say:**

- "I wish these people would just talk the way we do."
- "Even though I'm speaking their language, they're still rude to me."
- "When you go to other cultures, it makes you realize how much better the U.S. is."
- "These people don't value life the way we do."
- "Boy, could we teach these people a lot of stuff."
- "What a sexist society!"
- "These people are so urbane and sophisticated, not like the superficial people back home."

- "I am embarrassed by my compatriots, so I spend all my time with the host country nationals."
- "I wish I could give up my own cultural background and really be one of these people."

### **DEVELOPING COMPETENCE: DEFENSE**

#### **DEVELOPMENTAL TASK:**

**Mitigate polarization by emphasizing "common humanity"**

#### **CHALLENGE AND SUPPORT:**

**Learners experience of difference:** Maximum Challenge

**Educators should emphasize:** Maximum Support

#### **TO SUPPORT THE LEARNERS:**

##### **Content:**

- Universality of ethnocentrism (in-group/out-group distinctions)
- Existing (but previously unaddressed) differences within the in-group (such as learning styles, personality type, etc.)
- Address affect - something for each person to identify with

##### **Process:**

- Avoid cultural contrasts
- Provide reassurance and information about similarities
- Allow structured opportunities to share concerns
- Focus curiosity on the culture of their own group
- Promote cooperative activities

#### **TO CHALLENGE THE LEARNERS:**

##### **Content:**

- Historical contexts (wars, slavery, colonization, etc.) .
- Commonalities, including shared needs and goals, between in-group and out-group

##### **Process:**

- Stress conflict mediation and team-building
- Identify existing/transferable skills at dealing with difference
- Promote cooperative activities

#### **STAGE-APPROPRIATE INTERCULTURAL SKILLS:**

- The discipline to maintain personal control

- The ability to manage anxiety
- Tolerance
- Patience

### III. MINIMIZATION OF DIFFERENCE

Recognition and acceptance of superficial cultural differences such as eating customs, etc., while holding that all human beings are essentially the same. Emphasis on the similarity of people and commonality of basic values. Tendency to define the basis of commonality in ethnocentric terms (i.e., since everyone is essentially like us, "just be yourself").

6. Minimization/Physical Universalism: Emphasis on commonality of human beings in terms of physiological similarity. (e.g., "After all, we're all human!").

7. Minimization/Transcendent Universalism: Emphasis on commonality of human beings as subordinate to a particular supernatural being, religion, or social philosophy. (e.g., "We are all children of God, whether we know it or not.").

#### **Cognitive Structure:**

- World view is protected by attempting to subsume difference into familiar superordinate categories ("deep down we're all the same").

#### **Affective Quality:**

- Insistently nice.

#### **Behavioral Emphasis:**

- Active support for universal religious, moral, or political principles.

#### **Exercise of Power:**

- Acceptance of institutionalized privilege.

#### **At this stage, learners say:**

- "The key to getting along in any culture is to just be yourself-authentic and honest!"
- "Customs differ, of course, but when you really get to know them they're pretty much like us."
- "I have this intuitive sense of other people, no matter what their culture."
- "Technology is bringing cultural uniformity to the developed world"
- "While the context may be different, the basic need to communicate remains the same around the world."



- "No matter what their culture, people are pretty much motivated by the same things."
- "If people are really honest, they'll recognize that some values are universal."
- "It's a small world, after all!"

## **DEVELOPING COMPETENCE: MINIMIZATION**

### **DEVELOPMENTAL TASK:**

**Develop cultural self-awareness**

### **CHALLENGE AND SUPPORT:**

**Learners experience of difference:** Moderate Challenge

**Educators should emphasize:** Moderate Support

### **TO SUPPORT THE LEARNERS:**

#### **Content:**

- Definitions of culture, race, ethnicity, stereotypes, and generalizations.
- Culture, perception, and world view
- Minor subjective cultural differences, such as nonverbal behavior, or communication styles

#### **Process:**

- Avoid excessive stress on cultural contrasts
- Expand curiosity about their own culture to other cultures

### **TO CHALLENGE THE LEARNERS:**

#### **Content:**

- Categories and frameworks for understanding their own culture, including values and beliefs
- The privilege of dominant groups
- Use authentic materials (advertising, media, etc.) from their own culture

#### **Process:**

- Facilitate contact with ethnorelative resource persons in structured activities
- Structure opportunities for difference-seeking
- Focus primarily on cultural self-awareness
- Use selected and trained ethnorelative resource persons

- Build on positive affect to motivate further exploration

**STAGE-APPROPRIATE INTERCULTURAL SKILLS:**

- Cultural general knowledge
- Open-mindedness
- Knowledge of their own culture
- Listening skills
- The ability to perceive others accurately
- The ability to maintain a nonjudgmental interaction posture

**IV. ACCEPTANCE OF DIFFERENCE**

Recognition and appreciation of cultural differences in behavior and values. Acceptance of cultural differences as viable alternative solutions to the organization of human existence.

Cultural relativity. The beginning of ability to interpret phenomena within context.

Categories of difference are consciously elaborated.

8. Acceptance/Behavioral Relativism: All behavior exists in cultural context. Ability to analyze complex interaction in culture-contrast terms.

9. Acceptance/Value Relativism: Beliefs, values, and other general patterns of assigning "goodness" and "badness" to ways of being in the world all exist in cultural context.

**Cognitive Structure:**

- Differentiation and elaboration of cultural categories; development of a metalevel view of cultural difference, including one's own culture

**Affective Quality:**

- Curiosity

**Behavioral Emphasis:**

- Acquisition of knowledge about cultures, including one's own

**Exercise of Power:**

- Tends to be avoided through inaction (liberal paralysis)

**At this stage, learners say:**

- ""The more difference the better-more difference equals more creative ideas!""
- ""You certainly wouldn't want to have all the same kind of people around-the ideas get stale, and besides, its boring.""
- ""I always try to study about a new culture before I go there.""

- "The more cultures you know about, the better comparisons you can make."
- "Sometimes it's confusing, knowing that values are different in various cultures and wanting to be respectful, but still wanting to maintain my own core values."
- "When studying abroad, every student needs to be aware of relevant cultural differences."
- "I know my homestay family and I have had very different life experiences, but we're learning to work together."
- "Where can I learn more about Mexican culture to be effective in my communication?"

## **DEVELOPING COMPETENCE: ACCEPTANCE**

### **DEVELOPMENTAL TASK:**

**Refine analysis of cultural contrasts**

### **CHALLENGE AND SUPPORT:**

**Learners experience of difference:** Low Challenge

**Educators should emphasize:** Moderate Challenge

### **TO SUPPORT THE LEARNERS:**

#### **Content:**

- More complex subjective cultural differences including values analysis
- Elaboration of categories for cultural contrast and comparison
- Relationship between cognitive and communication styles

#### **Process:**

- Make cultural difference the focus while deepening cultural self-awareness
- Prepare learners for cultural frame-of-reference shifting

### **TO CHALLENGE THE LEARNERS:**

#### **Content:**

- The appropriate use of culture-general (etic) and culture-specific (emic) categories
- Issues of cultural relativity, distinguishing it from moral or ethical relativity

**Process:**

- Build on enthusiasm for "difference-seeking" to promote examination of more profound contrasts
- Provide guided experiential learning opportunities such as homestays, drops-offs, simulations and role plays requiring intercultural empathy

**STAGE-APPROPRIATE INTERCULTURAL SKILLS:**

- Cultural specific knowledge
- Cognitive flexibility
- Knowledge of other cultures
- Contextual knowledge
- Respect for others' values and beliefs
- Tolerance of ambiguity

**V. ADAPTATION TO DIFFERENCE**

The development of communication skills that enable intercultural communication. Effective use of empathy, or frame of reference shifting, to understand and be understood across cultural boundaries.

**10. Adaptation/Empathy:** Ability to consciously shift perspective into alternative cultural world view elements and act in culturally appropriate ways in those areas.

**11. Adaptation/Pluralism:** Internalization of more than one complete world view. Behavior shifts completely into different frames without much conscious effort.

**Cognitive Structure:**

- Knowledge and behavior are linked by conscious intention; category boundaries become more flexible and permeable

**Affective Quality:**

- Competence

**Behavioral Emphasis:**

- Intentional perspective-taking, empathy

**Exercise of Power:**

- Ability to recognize and respond to power in cultural context; some ability to exercise power appropriately in alternative contexts

**At this stage, learners say:**

- "To solve this dispute, I'm going to have to change my approach."

- "I know they're really trying hard to adapt to my style, so it's fair that I try to meet them halfway."
- "I greet people from my culture and people from the host culture somewhat differently to account for cultural differences in the way respect is communicated."
- "I can maintain my values and also behave in culturally appropriate ways."
- "In a study abroad program, every student should be able to adapt to at least some cultural differences."
- "To solve this dispute, I need to change my behavior to account for the difference in status between me and my counterpart from the other culture."
- "I'm beginning to feel like a member of this culture."
- "The more I understand this culture, the better I get at the language."

### **DEVELOPING COMPETENCE: ADAPTATION**

#### **DEVELOPMENTAL TASK:**

**Develop frame of reference shifting skills**

#### **CHALLENGE AND SUPPORT:**

Learners experience of difference: Low Challenge

Educators should emphasize: High challenge

#### **TO SUPPORT THE LEARNERS:**

##### **Content:**

- Models of culture shock and cultural adaptation
- Advanced cultural topics requiring intercultural empathy (e.g., appreciation of humor, assessment of cultural deviance)

##### **Process:**

- Facilitate opportunities for learners to practice behavior in known cultures
- Use trained ethnorelative cultural informants in less structured activities (small groups, case studies, etc.)
- Prepare learners to learn autonomously (use of cultural informants, research strategies, etc.)

**TO CHALLENGE THE LEARNERS:****Content:**

- Cultural identity development (ethnic identity models, intercultural sensitivity models)
- Re-entry

**Process:**

- Provide opportunities to interact in previously unexplored cultural contexts
- Address deeper anxiety issues (e.g., "internal culture shock," identity conflicts, etc.)

**STAGE-APPROPRIATE INTERCULTURAL SKILLS:**

- Empathy
- Risk-taking skills
- Problem-solving skills
- Interaction management skills
- Flexibility

**VI. INTEGRATION OF DIFFERENCE**

The internalization of bicultural or multicultural frames of reference. Maintaining a definition of identity that is "marginal" to any particular culture. Seeing one's self as "in process."

**12. Integration/Contextual Evaluation:** Ability to use multiple cultural frames of reference in evaluating phenomena. Similar to "contextual relativism" in Perry's terms.

**13. Integration/Constructive Marginality:** Acceptance of an identity that is not primarily based in any one culture. Ability to facilitate constructive contact between cultures-for one's self and for others. Participation to some extent in a "marginal reference group," where other marginals rather than cultural compatriots are perceived as similar.

**Cognitive Structure:**

- World view categories are seen as "constructs" maintained by self-reflexive consciousness (cultures and individuals are "making themselves up")

**Affective Quality:**

- Confusion, authenticity

**Behavioral Emphasis:**

- Formation and maintenance of constructed affiliation groups; cultural mediation

**Exercise of Power:**

- Culturally appropriate, but tending toward consensual

**At this stage, learners say:**

- "Everywhere is home, if you know enough about how things work there."
- "I feel most comfortable when I'm bridging differences between the cultures I know."
- "Whatever the situation, I can usually look at it from a variety of cultural points of view."
- "In an intercultural world, everyone needs to have a transcultural mindset."
- "I truly enjoy participating fully in both of my cultures."
- "My decision-making skills are enhanced by having multiple frames of reference."

**DEVELOPING COMPETENCE: INTEGRATION****DEVELOPMENTAL TASK:**

**Resolve the multicultural identity**

**CHALLENGE AND SUPPORT:**

**Learners experience of difference:** Low Challenge

**Educators should emphasize:** High Challenge

**TO SUPPORT THE LEARNERS:****Content:**

- Theoretical frameworks for constructing a multicultural identity

**Process:**

- Create opportunities for marginal peer group interaction
- Provide options for marginals to serve as resource persons
- Model constructive marginality

**TO CHALLENGE THE LEARNERS:****Content:**

- Cultural mediation models
- Modes of the multicultural self and society
- Models of ethical development

**Process:**

- Promote a view of self-as-process (choice-making)
- Encourage commitments and boundary setting
- Discuss strategies for cultural identity construction

**STAGE-APPROPRIATE INTERCULTURAL SKILLS:**

- A culturally sensitive sense of humor
- The ability to create new categories
- Role flexibility
- Identity flexibility

Derived from: Bennett, Milton J. "Towards a Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity" in R. Michael Paige, ed. *Education for the Intercultural Experience*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1993.



## Appendix III: Interview Guide

**Interview Guide**

1. Upon first arriving to the community, what were cultural differences that you connected with?
  - Follow up: What were the ones that were harder to understand as an outsider?
2. What was your experience establishing yourself as a neutral community member as well as an educated professional with access to resources?
3. When you first arrived in your host community, what were the biggest adjustments you made to your behavior?
4. Were there times that you concealed your social identity within your host community when you first arrived? Can you describe the context of the scenario and the reason why did conceal these things?
  - Follow up: What do you perceive were the effects of that decision?
5. Were there aspects about yourself (identity, behavior) that you were prepared to keep hidden? In other words, what was the decision making process like for you to reveal or conceal these aspects?
6. As you moved on in your service, what were some of your areas of growth within your integration? In what ways did you feel more comfortable about your presence in the community? Were there aspects of cultural differences that you remained stuck in throughout your time there?
7. As you moved on in your service, can you describe any moments, if any, where you disclosed parts of your identity/behavior that you hadn't in the beginning? What was that decision process like? What had changed within yourself or your integration process to allow you to disclose this information?
8. How can Volunteers distinguish the parts of themselves that will have positive effects on their community members from the ones that should remain concealed so as to not have negative effects on their service, cultural relations, etc?
9. What are the responsibilities that PCVs have to revealing their social identities with community members?

10. Is there any advice surrounding these topics that you would offer to future groups coming in that could help inform the training of incoming Volunteers?